Narrative Inquiry in Language Teaching and Learning Research
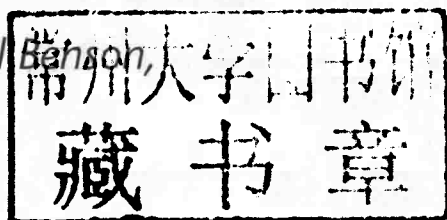
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NARRATIVE INQUIRY IN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING RESEARCH

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Narrative Inquiry in Language Teaching and Learning Research provides an entry-level introduction to narrative inquiry methods – research methods that involve the use of stories as data or as a means of presenting findings – that is based on the sociological and psychological literature, but is grounded in published empirical research within the field of language teaching and learning. It discusses basic definitions and concepts in narrative inquiry, explains how and why narrative methods have been used in language teaching and learning research, and outlines the different approaches and topics covered by this research. It also examines the different ways of eliciting, analyzing, and presenting narrative inquiry data. Narrative inquiry offers exciting prospects for language teaching and learning research and this book is the first focused and practical guide for readers who are interested in understanding or carrying out narrative studies.

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INTRODUCTION

The use of narratives in research is nothing new. In the field of psychology, Sigmund Freud, who is said to have been an enthusiastic reader of Sherlock Holmes detective stories, used narrative case studies extensively in his work (Brooks, 1979). In the field of sociology, the Chicago School announced its presence in 1919 with a volume that begins with a powerful argument for the use of individual biographies in the investigation of social conditions, followed by an individual biography of a Polish peasant (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1919). Towards the end of the 20th century, however, when language teaching and learning research began to incorporate psychological and sociological approaches, these fields had come under the sway of experimental and statistical survey methodologies. It is only very recently, therefore, following a resurgence of interest in narrative in the social sciences that narrative inquiry began to take its place in the panoply of approaches to research that are now available to language teaching and learning researchers.

Our interests in narrative inquiry developed separately from each other at a time when few narrative studies of language teaching and learning had been published. We drew on psychological and sociological research, as well as emerging research in the field of education, both for our basic understanding of narrative inquiry and for our detailed understanding of methods of data collection and analysis. Although we were not aware of it at the time, others were doing much the same thing and we welcomed each new study with enthusiasm as it appeared. Eventually, we began to explore issues in narrative inquiry for language teaching and learning together through several collaborations. At the same time, the rate at which new narrative studies were published began to accelerate to the point where narrative inquiry could be considered an established approach to qualitative research in our field. The driving force behind this book is the belief that there is now a "critical mass" of narrative research in the field of language teaching

and learning itself on which to build a manual of narrative research methodology that is specific to this field. This is not to say that we encourage readers to ignore work in other fields, but rather that we encourage exploration of the ways in which this work has been contextualized within and is exemplified by research on language teaching and learning.

The aim of this book is to offer advice on data collection and analysis to researchers who are interested in experimenting with narrative research. In this respect, this is a conventional "research manual." At the same time, we have adopted an innovative approach in basing this advice on a database of more than 175 published studies, from which we draw examples of how language teaching and learning researchers have used narrative inquiry to address specific issues in specific contexts of research. This means that, instead of beginning from general principles, we begin from concrete examples in an attempt to show how narratives are actually used, rather than explain how they should be used, to address issues of language teaching and learning. While we do offer general advice from time to time, we also encourage a situated and experimental approach to narrative research, which is, in fact, the approach that is most characteristic of published research to date. A narrative research journey is not a matter of following a set of cut and dried directions, but of feeling one's way through a project with the guidance of those who have gone before. By mapping out approaches and methods that have been used in published work on language teaching and learning to date, we hope to make that journey a little less unpredictable.

The picture of narrative inquiry in language teaching and learning that has emerged during the writing of this book has turned out to be complex, involving two major uses of narratives (*investigating* narratives and *writing* narratives), two directions of approach (through the *content* and *discourse* of narrative), and a variety of methods of collecting and analyzing data. In order to make sense of this complexity, we begin with an overview of narrative inquiry approaches both outside and inside the field of language teaching and learning research (Chapter 1). In the next three chapters, we deal separately with three major approaches to collecting data for narrative studies: orally (Chapter 2), in writing (Chapter 3), and in multimodal form (Chapter 4). Like all divisions in research, these are a matter of convenience and we note here that there is a certain bias towards the kinds of projects in which researchers collect original data from other people ("biographical" or "third-person" studies). Investigation of published accounts of language learning and "autobiographical" or "first-person" reflection are two important approaches to narrative inquiry that are not discussed in these chapters, because in these approaches the real work tends to begin at the point of analysis.

The last two chapters of the book deal separately with data analysis (Chapter 5) and reporting narrative studies (Chapter 6). In these chapters we are again concerned with the full range of data types and with a variety of analytical and reporting strategies. These chapters cover thematic and discourse approaches to

analyzing narrative data and the use of narrative writing as a strategy for analyzing non-narrative data and presenting findings.

This book is intended to be read not so much as a set of guidelines to be followed, but as a map that we hope will help readers find their own ways through the rather complex terrain of narrative inquiry in language teaching and learning research. There are a good number of summaries of published studies scattered throughout the book. We have selected these papers because they exemplify particular approaches to methodology and we encourage readers to follow them up by reading the original papers. There is no single way of carrying out a narrative inquiry study and, indeed, it seems that each new study brings with it a new approach. In our view, this is all to the good and we hope that readers will feel inspired to add not only to the quantity of narrative studies in our field, but also to the variety of approaches available to us.

CONTENTS

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NARRATIVE INQUIRY IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS

1.1 The Narrative Turn in the Social Sciences

Jerome Bruner, one of the founding fathers of narrative inquiry, writes of two basic modes of thought, each providing a distinctive way of ordering experience. "A good story and a well-formed argument are different natural kinds," he writes, and both can be convincing in their own ways (1986: 11). Arguments convince of their "truth," appealing to procedures for establishing formal and empirical proof; stories convince of their "lifelikeness," appealing more to criteria of verisimilitude. Of these two modes of thought—Bruner calls them "paradigmatic" and "narrative"—the second is both older and more deeply rooted in everyday thinking; telling stories about past events is both a "universal human activity" (Riessman, 1993: 3) and "the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful" (Polkinghorne, 1988: 1). The paradigmatic mode of thought is more recent and associated with development of rational thinking. It is a widely held view that research is a way of producing and distributing knowledge that favors rational argument over narrative. In recent years, however, more and more social science researchers have questioned this view, suggesting that paradigmatic thought can lead to conclusions that are divorced from the lived reality of phenomena and conveyed through academic forms of writing that fail to convince, precisely because they lack the quality of lifelikeness that we expect of a good story.

In light of this critique, the social sciences have witnessed what has sometimes been called a "narrative turn." Narrative has become both a legitimate mode of thinking and writing in research and the focal point of a variety of approaches that come under the heading of "narrative inquiry." Narrative inquiry is both complementary to experiment, observation, survey, and other research methods, and an "alternative paradigm for social research" (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and

Zilber, 1998: 1). As this book aims to provide a concise account of the practicalities of using narratives in language teaching and learning research, we refer readers to other sources for more detailed discussion of their use in the social sciences (Bruner, 1990; Lieblich, et al., 1998; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1993, 2008). In brief, the main strength of narrative inquiry lies in its focus on how people use stories to make sense of their experiences in areas of inquiry where it is important to understand phenomena from the perspectives of those who experience them. Lieblich, et al. (1998: 7) write of two major interests in the field of psychology: predicting and controlling human behavior, and exploring and understanding individuals' inner worlds. One of the best ways of learning about individuals' inner worlds, they suggest, is through "verbal accounts and stories presented by individual narrators about their lives and their experienced reality." In the field of sociology, narratives have been seen as a means of investigating social phenomena from the perspective of "the changing experiences and outlooks of individuals in their everyday lives" (Roberts, 2002: 1). In the field of education, narrative inquiry has proved especially fruitful in the study of teachers' professional lives and careers (Bathmaker and Harnett, 2010; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Goodson and Sikes, 2001; Loughran and Russell, 2002; Webster and Mertova, 2007). Narrative is, in fact, part and parcel of research in many fields of inquiry, but we mention psychology, sociology, and education here, because language is, perhaps, best understood as a psychological, social, and educational phenomenon. Narrative inquiry is relevant to research in our field because it helps us to understand the inner mental worlds of language teachers and learners and the nature of language teaching and learning as social and educational activity.

But if narrative inquiry has much to contribute, why have we only recently come to realize its value? Four main explanations for the narrative turn in the social sciences have been offered. First, narrative inquiry has an intuitive appeal to researchers who have "become weary of variables and the quantification of the positivistic approach" (Josselson, 1993: xv). This explanation situates narrative inquiry within a broader turn towards qualitative research and points to a weakening of the assumption that psychological, social, and educational phenomena should be investigated in much the same way that scientists investigate natural phenomena. Second, interest in narratives reflects post-modern concerns with the self, identity, and individuality, arising from what Casey (1995: 216) calls a kind of "cultural vertigo" that is the consequence of "individuals vacating established social constructions of reality." This explanation situates narrative inquiry within a broader turn away from the quest for "grand" social theories that would enable social scientists to predict human behavior. A third, and related, explanation points to the importance that narrative has acquired in post-modernity as a resource that individuals draw upon in the construction of social identities (Giddens, 1991). From this perspective, self-narratives, or the stories people tell about themselves, help us to understand the ways in which individuals situate themselves and their activities in the world. Lastly, interest in narrative has been linked to a turn towards

the idea that research should both involve and empower the groups and individuals whose behaviors are the subject of research. Narrative inquiry expands the range of voices that are heard in research reports, often highlighting the experiences of marginalized groups outside the academy, although we should always bear in mind the ways in which these voices are mediated through those of the researcher in published work (Casey, 1995: 215).

No doubt there are other explanations for the rise of narrative inquiry, but for the moment let us stick to these four and ask about their implications for our own field. Are you more convinced by a richly described individual case study than you are by statistical analysis of experimental data collected from large numbers of people? Do you believe that we can best understand the social forces that condition language teaching and learning behavior by understanding how individuals interpret and respond to them? Would you like research to tell us more about the meanings that individuals attach to teaching and learning languages and the consequences that teaching and learning have for their lives? Would you like to hear more about the diversity of language teaching and learning experiences through the words of teachers and learners themselves? If you answer "yes" to these questions, then you are likely to be interested in narrative inquiry as an approach to language teaching and learning research. You may also be interested in narrative inquiry because it is a profoundly human way of carrying out research; it gets you out of the house or office and into the real world of teachers, learners, and the stories they have to tell.

1.2 What is Narrative Inquiry?

A fairy tale is a story and a person who tells a fairy tale is a storyteller, but fairy tales are not research. The same may be said of stories about language teaching or learning, although here the issue is more complicated because much depends on how the stories are produced and what we can learn from them. Narrative inquiry brings storytelling and research together either by using stories as research data or by using storytelling as a tool for data analysis or presentation of findings. Narrative inquiry is an established umbrella term for research involving stories; *Narrative Inquiry* is also the title of the major cross-disciplinary journal in the field. Narrative research and narrative study are sometimes used as alternative terms. In this book, however, two closely related terms—"narrative analysis" and "analysis of narratives"—will be used to refer to a basic distinction within narrative inquiry. Following Polkinghorne (1995), "analysis of narratives" refers to research in which stories are used as data, while "narrative analysis" refers to research in which storytelling is used as a means of analyzing data and presenting findings. Gao's (2010) study of the published memoirs of a disabled Chinese language learner is a good example of "analysis of narratives." In this case the narratives that serve as data are published, but researchers may also elicit spoken, written, or multimodal narratives directly from teachers and learners, and subject

them to further analysis. Wette and Barkhuizen's (2009) study of the curriculum challenges facing university English teachers in China is an example of an analysis of narratives study based on elicited written data. In "narrative analysis" researchers use narrative writing as a method of turning non-narrative data into stories in order to convey their understanding of the meaning of the data. Ó'Mochain's (2006) study of his attempt to address queer issues in an EFL course in a Japanese women's college draws on a variety of data sources but is reported in the form of a narrative. A second basic distinction concerns the relationship between researchers and participants in narrative research, for which we use the terms "biographical" and "autobiographical." In biographical approaches, the researchers analyze or tell participants' stories; in autobiographical research, they analyze or tell their own stories. These terms also delineate more specialized approaches within the broad field of narrative inquiry; in addition to "biographical research" (Chamberlayne, et al., 2000; Roberts, 2002), we have approaches such as "life history" (Bertaux, 1981; Goodson and Sikes, 2001), "life story" (Atkinson, 1998), and "oral history" research (Thompson, 2000); in addition to "autobiographical" research (Brockmeier and Carbaugh, 2001; Fivush and Haden, 2003), we have "autoethnography" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000), "personal experience" (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994), and "self-study" (Loughran and Russell, 2002). Recognizing that the distinction between biography and autobiography is often blurred in research, Benson (2004) uses the term "(auto)biographical" to describe research that involves either, or both, third-person and first-person data and methods. One source of confusion lies in the fact that the data used in biographical studies are often autobiographical from the participants' perspective. We would, for example, describe Gao's study of language memoirs as "biographical," although the data that he analyzes is autobiographical (Gao, 2010). The distinction between biography and autobiography, therefore, is related more to the roles of researchers, who either study other people (biographically) or themselves (autobiographically). The waters are muddied in studies where stories are "co-constructed" by the researchers and the participants. This may be true to some degree of all narrative analysis studies in which the researchers work with participants to construct stories that emerge in the course of the research (Barkhuizen, 2011). The word "participant" is used here, therefore, simply to identify the person whose experiences are narrated in a study (either biographically or autobiographically), in work in which relationships between subjects and researchers often turn out to be highly complex: for example, in papers where participants are listed alongside researchers as co-authors (Murray and Kojima, 2007; So and Dominguez, 2004) or in multi-voiced papers such as Benson, Chik, and Lim (2003), which includes autobiographical writing and both autobiographical and biographical analysis.

A third distinction that we find helpful concerns the focus of narrative inquiry: Are we interested in narrative itself or are we more interested in the content of narratives? There is now a great deal of research on the language, discourse, structure, and sociolinguistics of narratives, which is less concerned with what

narrators say than with how they say it (e.g., De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2012; Ochs and Capps, 2001; Norrick, 2000; Thornborrow and Coates, 2005; Toolan, 2001). There is also a good deal of research that is more concerned with what narrators have to say about the topics of their stories, including most psychological and sociological narrative studies, which focus on what narratives tell us either about the people who tell them, or about the situations and events they narrate. Because this book is mainly concerned with narrative inquiry as a resource for research on language teaching and learning, it is also mainly concerned with narrative content. We cannot ignore research on the language and discourse of narrative, however, because it has strong implications for the limits of what we can say about the content of narratives. In particular, there have been criticisms of the reliance on narrative content (or what are often called 'big stories') in narrative inquiry, which argue that when we study narratives, "we are neither accessing speakers' past experiences, nor their reflections on their past experiences (and through them how they reflect their selves)" (Bamberg, 2007: 144; Stokoe and Edwards, 2007; Vásquez, 2011). The 'small stories' perspective that these critics advocate focuses instead on the stories that people tell in the course of everyday conversation, or "how selves and identities are *done* in interactions . . . interactions in which narratives are made use of" (Bamberg, 2006: 146).

This is a complex issue that we will return to when we discuss methods of data analysis in Chapter 5, but for the present, we note our own view that there is a good deal to be learned from narratives of language teaching and learning, provided we are sensitive to "the interpretive nature of narration" (Pavlenko, 2007: 169) and do not fall into the trap of treating narratives as factual accounts of their subject matter. If a participant tells us, for example, that her school language classes were dull and uninspiring, we must treat the comment as a subjective interpretation of what the classes were like and not as an objective fact. We will also need to ask whether there was a particular reason why the participant described the classes in this way to us, the researchers, in the particular context in which the data were collected. The problem here, perhaps, is to understand exactly what narratives represent. In psychological research, narratives are often seen as a key to understanding the ways in which individuals organize their experiences and the identities through which they represent them to themselves and others. In sociological approaches such as oral history, narratives offer alternative perspectives to official or academic accounts of historical events and often uncover issues that had not previously been visible. We argue that, as long as we guard against the risk of treating narratives as offering access to the "truth" about language teaching and learning, they have very much the same potential. Narrative inquiry can help us to understand how language teachers and learners organize their experiences and identities and represent them to themselves and to others. In a field that very often favors abstract, theoretical understanding of processes over the particular, contextualized knowledge of participants (Firth and Wagner, 1997), it can also help us to understand language teaching and learning from the perspectives of teachers